

VOICES ON THE STREET

A UVic study leads to a better understanding of why some young people end up on the street

by Debbie Willis

Two University of Victoria researchers are doing more than dropping coins in the palms of panhandlers. In the only study of its kind in Canada, the two sociology professors are listening to the voices of street kids.

"We're trying to get beyond the myths of who these youths are," says Dr. Cecilia Benoit. "We want to understand street youth from their perspective."

Since 2001, Benoit and Dr. Mikael Jansson have interviewed almost 200 people between the ages of 14 and 18, asking questions about social backgrounds, health issues and risk behaviours. All the youth interviewed are only loosely connected to their families and the educational system, and are involved in street activities such as panhandling, prostitution and selling drugs.

"They all have something to say and they want to tell their stories," says Jansson.

The project is unusual because it "follows" street youth over the long-term. Over five years, Benoit and Jansson have done up to three interviews each

with more than 100 of the original participants. The researchers hope to continue the study for another five years, focusing on why some of the youth are able to move into employment or return to school, and others are not.

The study has led to a better understanding of what Jansson calls the "life trajectory" of street youth. For example, the study shows how wrong some misconceptions are about homelessness. Youth who sleep on the street do not necessarily come from abusive families, as one common stereotype dictates, nor are they on the street because they're too lazy to find work.

Rather, many street youth come from unsettled home situations. Most were constantly moved around as children, from one guardian's house to another, or from foster home to foster home. Some lived in as many as 25 different places before the age of 13.

"It's not that they've been abused, or neglected for a short time," says Benoit. "Often, there's constant mobility. They [as children] had very little opportunity to bond with others, and lived in an environment where they had no security."

Many young people come to the street in search of consistency and a community, says Benoit, but instead they often find the same transience they experienced during their early lives.

This information will be useful for community partner organizations, such as the Victoria Youth Empowerment Society, the Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society, and the Child and Family Counselling Association.

Benoit and Jansson also hope to influence government policy concerning street youth, who are increasingly becoming an issue in Victoria and elsewhere. "Globally, the number of youth detached from their families is growing," says Benoit. "They're an outcome, in part, of growing social inequality."

Most of all, Benoit and Jansson hope their study will help others to see beyond the stigma of homelessness, and realize that street youth are much like other teens. "They have friends and lovers, and they want jobs," says Jansson. "They want to join our community."

The project is funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

Jansson, left, and Benoit.

EDGEwise

Most street youth in Victoria live on less than \$115 per week, acquired from friends, family, and welfare, and activities like panhandling, theft and selling sex or drugs.

Only nine per cent of the youth interviewed by Benoit and Jansson had a job where they earned a wage, but 76 per cent said they had held a job in the past.

Street youth are more likely to use drugs than other teens. Forty-two per cent of male and female street youth said they had used crystal meth in the past six months, compared to less than three per cent of youth living at home.

Results of the project, titled "Risky Business? Experiences of Street Youth," are available online. Click on the research link at www.youth.society.uvic.ca.

University of Victoria researchers were awarded more than \$60 million in external research grants and contracts in 2004/05, nearly doubling over the past five years.

This article was written by Debbie Willis, an English and writing student, and a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge).

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